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AUTHOR Barker, Bruce O.
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ABSTRACT

Although roots of adult education can be traced back more than a century, rural adult education is an emerging discipline in American education which has yet to develop an established research base. Recent research has established that rural adult learners look like, act like, and learn like urban adult learners, but their opportunities for participation in adult education programs are limited because of access, distance and travel, self-confidence, and affordability. Identified as providers of rural adult education are four-year colleges/universities, federal and state government agencies, private organizations, research institutes, regional libraries, state departments of education, two-year community colleges, and vocational-technical colleges. Research shows programming offers undergraduate degrees, job training and professional development, noncredit conferences and workshops, Adult Basic Education courses, rural focused curricula, and community development activities. Efforts to improve research on rural adult education focus on creating a complete picture of rural adult learners and educational providers, developing policy options more responsive to increased costs associated with delivering services to rural areas, examining collaborative models and methods of coordination that best serve rural communities, and studying successful rural adult programs. Research is also needed on the role of adult education as a mechanism to promote rural development. (NEC)

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IDENTIFICATION OF FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

A Paper Presented

at the

Annual Meeting of the Texas Association

for

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Lubbock, Texas

By

Bruce O. Barker
Assistant Professor
and
Associate Director of Continuing Education

Box 4110
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas 79409

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ADULT EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA: A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH AND IDENTIFICATION OF FURTHER RESEARCH NEEDS

Rural Americans--those who live on farms, in the open countryside or in small towns and communities of less than 2500 population--comprise more than one-fourth of our country's population. Data from the 1980 census report indicates that 59.5 million people or 28.8 percent of the United States' population live in rural settings (Rosenfeld, 1981). Many adults living in rural areas--like their urban and suburban counterparts--have need for and desire to participate in postsecondary education programs. Unlike their city cousins, however, adults in rural areas face barriers that restrict their access to educational offerings. Factors such as distance and geographical isolation, poor or nonexistent public transportation systems, and the lack of comprehensive educational delivery models severely limit postsecondary educational opportunities for our nation's rural adult citizenry.

In addressing the problem of adult education in rural America, Cross (1981) called rural Americans the most educationally disadvantaged of all population subgroups in our society, reporting that they participated in organized instruction at about half the rate of the average American. Rural learners who live in areas of low population density and/or geographical isolation are most definitely provided fewer educational services and opportunities. Several reasons for such inequity can be cited (Barker, 1985). The lower income levels of many rural adults compounded by higher tuition fees generally associated with outreach programs results in greater financial burdens, thereby limiting accessibility to educational offerings. Also, learners in rural America are highly dependent upon the automobile to travel

to learning centers. Poor road conditions, long distances, and increasing fuel and transportation costs have a greater adverse affect on rural citizens than on urban dwellers. In addition, rural adults, on the average, are older than their urban counterparts and have completed fewer years of formal education. As a result, rural adults are more apt to feel uncomfortable in developing study skills or may lack confidence in their learning ability. They may feel "too old to learn," as well as fearful of how family members or individuals within the community might react to their interest in education. An associated concern is that rural households are usually larger than urban households, suggesting a need for family support and child care assistance not only while attending classes, but also when studying at home.

Despite these concerns, most writers in the field agree that little evidence exists to suggest that the subject of serving rural adult populations is getting any major attention. Most in fact, report an overall dearth of information in the literature about rural adult learners and successful outreach programs (Boyd, 1983; Killacky, 1984; Treadway, 1984).

A Portrait of Rural Adult Learners?

Although information on rural adult participation in postsecondary education programs is scant, McCannon (1985) has recently reported the most comprehensive assessment to date of the interests, characteristics, motivations, and participation patterns of rural adult learners. As part of the Action Agenda for Rural Adult Postsecondary Education, McCannon analyzed data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on 3558 participants in adult education programs during 1981. McCannon labeled these as "rural residents" because they did not reside in a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA) which is defined by the Census Bureau as a large population center of 50,000 or more people or a community having economic

and social integration with a population center of at least 50,000 residents. According to McCannon's analysis of the NCES data, 30.3 percent of the nation's adult learners in 1981 were rural residents. In truth, this figure is subject to serious inflation inasmuch as the NCES reports its statistics by SMSA and non-SMSA. McCannon has chosen to designate SMSA as urban and non-SMSA as rural. The problem with this kind of distinction is that: (1) it implies rural America collectively consists of all our society's nonmetropolitan areas, and (2) it does not provide any measure of how truly rural or isolated one's residence in a non-SMSA really is. A more accurate definition between what constitutes rural and urban residents is needed in order to describe attributes of the two groups. Also, rural America is wondrously diverse. While rural citizens within a community are likely to be more homogeneous than their urban counterparts, rural communities are much more likely to differ from one another than do urban cities (Sher, 1977). Gilford (1981, page 189) provides insights into the broad diversities unique to rural America:

> Some rural areas are changing rapidly; some are not. Some are quietly dying because they have been forsaken by succeeding generations of young people. Some rural areas are basking in prosperity, and their residents enjoy many of the amenities of urban life; some rural areas remain remote, isolated, and lonely places whose residents struggle to make ends meet in an oppresive atmosphere of grinding poverty. Some rural areas are becoming more and more like urban areas... Few generalizations about rural America are valid, because any valid generalization would have to be carefully hedged with qualifications that it could hardly be considered a generalization.

In addition to a review of the NCES data, McCannon gathered survey data in September of 1984 from 812 participants in adult education programs at five education institutions in the Midwest--Drake University, DesMoines, Iowa; John Logan College, Carterville, Illinois; University of Minnesota; University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota; and University of

Wisconsin at River Falls, River Falls, Wisconsin. These institutions were selected because of their high incidence of adult learners and their overall rural settings. The survey instrument used by McCannon (1985, see pages 42-43), although gathering useful information, did not inquire about how far participants lived from the college/university nor any information about their residence or the possibility of geographical isolation. Hence, whether or not these participants were indeed rural residents is only assumed.

Based on his distinctions between urban and rural, analysis of the NCES data, and survey findings, McCannon states that rural adult learners were similar to urban adult learners on all variables examined--sex, age, occupation, income levels, reason for enrollment in adult education, subjects taken, number of courses enrolled in, and source of payment. Most adults enrolled in courses for occupational advancement or personal development with business courses selected as the most popular subject. These findings confirm earlier writings by McCannon (1983, page 17) in which he states, "rural adult learners look like, act like, and learn like urban adult learners."

Differences Between Rural and Urban Adult Learners

It may be true that the adult education interests and participation patterns of rural and city people are very similar, yet there are distinct differences between these two groups. The most notable is in the location of their residences. The initial paragraphs in the article made reference to some of the challenges facing rural adults who have interest in adult education programs. Access, distance and travel, self-confidence, and affordability are factors which suggest substantial differences in the learning opportunities available to rural adults. Rural areas are more likely to have a high incidence of poverty, substandard housing, and isolation from adequate medical services.

Although rural adult learners may indeed look like, act like and learn like urban adult learners, their opportunities for participation in adult education programs are definitely not the same.

Adult Education Providers in Rural America

Adult education practice in rural America has traditionally been the domain of the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) which includes the United States Department of Agriculture at the national level, the land grant university system at the state level, and the County Extension Office at the local level. With offices in some 3150 counties and a staff in excess of 18,000 (Killacky, 1984), the CES's program emphasis includes agriculture, natural resources and environment, home economics, community development, and the 4-H youth program.

An inventory of model programs for rural adult learners identified by researchers of the Action Agenda Project for Adult Rural Postsecondary Education (Hone, 1984) include the following as providers of rural adult education programs: four-year colleges and universities, federal and state government agencies, private organizations, research institutes, regional libraries, state departments of education, two-year community colleges, and vocational-technical colleges. Programming content by these providers includes the offering of undergraduate degrees, job training and professional development, noncredit conferences and workshops, Adult Basic Education courses, rural focused curricula, and community development activities. According to Hone, the most widely accepted format for rural adult education is the traditional classroom approach followed by multi-site teaching, and traveling instructors. Less used formats, in descending order, are computer assisted instruction, correspondence study, peer teachers, and broadcasts to remote sites.

Research Needs in Rural Adult Education

What does all this tell us, and how much do we really know about rural adult learners. The work by McCannon (1985), Hone (1984), and others of the Action Agenda for Rural Adult Postsecondary Education has brought increased attention to the needs of rural adult learners. Hone's research suggests that a broad array of educational providers are seriously attempting to reach out to adults living in rural areas. McCannon's work, while not addressing concerns of distance and isolation, leads one to infer that rural adult learners share many of the same characteristics as urban adult learners. Both efforts have provided educational practitioners with useful information. Much more is needed. For even though the roots of adult education can be traced back more than a century, rural adult education is an emerging discipline in American education and one which has yet to develop a firmly established research base (Spears and Maes, 1985). According to Spears and Maes (page 24), efforts to improve research on the topic fall into four areas:

1. Research directed at creating a more complete picture of both rural adult learners and educational providers.
2. Research directed at policy options that would be more responsive to the increased costs associated with delivering services to rural areas.
3. Research on collaborative models and methods of coordination that best serve rural communities.
4. Research that provides a more thorough study of successful programs in rural adult education.

In addition to these topics, research is also needed on the role of adult education in rural areas as a mechanism to promote rural development. In view of the increasing age of our population and the urban to rural migration flow of the past decade, the study of rural adult education as a unique discipline is one which requires further investigation and research.

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